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Omahan may become first Ph.D. phone grad

An Omaha man may become the first student in the country to earn a Ph.D. degree by telephone.

With a "hot line" connected from his kitchen table in Omaha to classes in Lincoln, Jim Vorel has finished all his course work toward a doctorate in ancient history from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

A serious fall took Vorel, 34, out of the classroom in January 1979.

The special phone hook-up was arranged by Bradley Munn, coordinator of handicapped programs and director of Affirmative Action and Equal Opportunity at UNL. The university history department and telecommunications center also cooperated in the project.

Munn said the link-up is the first such in the nation, and both Vorel and his professors deem the experiment a success.

"And ironic," said Vorel. "Who'd think someone who has spent his life studying ancient history would be on the cutting edge of a high technology achievement?"

Vorel said he had never sought special assistance before the accident.

"Sure, I had cerebral palsy and walked with a limp, but I managed just fine ... until the fall, I thought I was on the high road to career success," he said.

Vorel was a teaching assistant in the history department and had his sights set on a university professorship.

Now, he hopes to get his Ph.D. within the next 18 months. After that, he's considering a career in outreach at a university as well as a teaching or a research career with the Central Intelligence Agency.

"I don't want to narrow myself in yet," said Vorel, who faces two more operations before he hopes to walk again.

Vorel said taking college classes over the telephone has meant many adjustments, including mailing in research papers a week earlier than the deadline for other students. He also has had to work out special arrangements with Love Library for extended book loans.

"In my situation, you either develop a sense of humor or become morose. I've been down, believe me," he said. "But I must really compliment both Munn and the Department of History profs ... I can see a system like this changing the lives of a lot of handicapped people in the future."